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AUTHOR Marockie, Mary
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ABSTRACT

A description is presented of an improvement program that focused upon a small, flexible, open primary school. The school had been targeted for improvement because of rather low test scores. Improvement efforts focused on findings from four basic strands of school research: (1) structured learning environment; (2) academic feedback; (3) high teacher/high student expectations; and (4) time on task. Actions taken in each of these areas are briefly discussed, some results are noted, and expectations for the future are projected. (JD)

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USING EFFECTIVE TEACHING/SCHOOL RESEARCH IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by Dr. Mary Marockie

I am delighted to share with you information about a project with which I have been working for approximately a year. First, since all of you are not from West Virginia, I would like to explain the Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) in West Virginia. Our RESA is located near Pittsburgh in the northern part of West Virginia where we serve the northern panhandle counties. We are an agency of about 12 people. My area of concern is curriculum and teacher education, so one of our primary goals is to make educators in our region aware of some of the newest trends in education. I would like to share with you how we have been doing this and our involvement in a project titled "The North Park Venture."

In our RESA, we produce a Teacher Education Digest (TEC Digest), which is a publication of digested articles for teachers and educators in our region. We send out over 2,000 publications five times a year. Also in the Digest, we highlight pilot research, and we summarize it for teachers and educators in our region.

Over the last two years, we have been summarizing the findings of the Effective Teaching and Effective Schools research and have condensed much of the research in the Digest. Along with that, for the last five years we have conducted a major convention for all the educators in our region. The major focus this past year was a strand on Effective Teaching and Effective Schools research.

I would like to alert you to a good presentation that you may want to include at your county or district level. At our convention, we had an ASCD tape on Effective Teaching and Effective Schools research. It was a suberb, well-done tape which we used with the principals and teachers in our region. I would recommend it if you are interested in a very succinct way to get research across to people at the awareness stage which is how we used it. Also, there is an excellent book which I have used called Time to Learn. This book gives an excellent summary on the time-on-task studies.

The North Park Venture is a name which we gave to a project in a small primary school in Wheeling, West

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Virginia. The school has 8 teachers, 140 students, and a dynamic leader. It is a flexible, open school which is very crucial to what we have done in that school. The fact that this school is open has contributed to the success of the venture.

The scores were very important, but we needed to look at the other variables in the school.

In May of last year, the principal of this school came to me and said that her school had been targeted for improvement. The test scores were somewhat low in that school, and that was a factor in the targeting of that particular school for the next year. I said that I thought that we needed to look at variables other than the test scores. That is when I began discussing more specifically with the principal the research which I thought would apply to North Park. From that point on, she was very interested, and has read all the research information that I have given her.

There is an administrative chain out of the central office that works directly with the North Park staff. The administrative team in this case usually consisted of the math supervisor, the language arts supervisor, the testing supervisor, and the assistant superintendent in charge of instruction.

From the very beginning, we said that the teachers are experts on their grade level, on their material, and, therefore, we needed them to make curriculum decisions.

They would come in periodically as a group of colleagues. I must stress that point, that we respected the teachers in this climate as colleagues and not subordinates. If another role is taken, the teachers, in my opinion, will not become the curriculum experts which should be expected of them.

We have done curriculum congruence which is what today has been called curriculum alignment. There is a very sophisticated plan in the county, but in this school, it was even more sophisticated. We had been matching the skills of CTBS, the state's test, with the curriculum. We took the philosophy that you never go into battle without armor. Therefore, it was our philosophy that every child needed to be equipped to the fullest potential, and we did not want to make the test a surprise. We did not teach the test, but we did teach the processes of that test throughout the year. There are counties in West Virginia doing that in a very splendid manner.

Four basic strands of research were basic to the school's program. We focused on a narrow part of those strands in view of the fact that it was an initial project. Those strands were:

- structured learning environment,
- academic feedback,

- high teacher/high student expectations, and
- time-on-task.

I would like to discuss very briefly each of these areas, tell you about the results, and what we hope to attain in year two.

The spelling sections of CTBS has a definite format. We made sure that the students were familiar with that same format so they could answer many of those spelling test items. We did not want to surprise them. We equipped them to fight the battle. That is our responsibility as educators.

Structured Learning Environment

We made some very basic decisions about North Park. We attempted to organize the environment even down to the number of bulletin boards in the building. (Too many bulletin boards were over-stimulating to us as adults, and we felt that they were also over-stimulating to children.)

We had no pull out programs. No children were ever pulled out of the school day. We chose not to send any child in special education to another school.

We had no student teachers, because we did not want anybody in the building that we had to train further. Also, we did not want anybody in the building who was not directly supervised by the school system, especially prestudent teachers. It was very important that we not contaminate what we were effecting at that point.

The focus was on whole group instruction from the standpoint that whole group instruction followed two basic components. This construct of learning had to be always followed by correction and individualization. Therefore, we had to make a decision on the reading program. We chose one reading program which fit into our model beautifully, especially the concept of remediation and individualization. We chose to use a program in the first grade that encompassed this philosophy at least to some degree. We did the same thing in mathematics in the kindergarten, and in the first grade, second grade, and third grade. We supported the concept that 90 percent of the students in the school can learn well. We know that some of them learn more slowly than others, but we accepted Bloom's research, which cites that 15 percent more time is needed by some children to master a skill. This time was provided through a reteach and preteach cycle. Our remediation was based on reteaching/preteaching the very same material.

Academic Feedback

We worked a great deal on making sure that teachers were aware of the fact that they should give parents as well as the children a great deal of information. We sent home three newsletters to parents about the skills that the child would be learning this week, next week, and the next week. There is a direct mailing to parents to make them feel that they are an invested part of the school venture.

Expectations

North Park draws from a variety of students. It is a beautiful little school, but many of the students come from an area that did not have a high economic level. For some reason, the staff initially felt that some of the children may not be successful. That view was stopped immediately through the dynamic leadership of the principal. The principal maintained strongly, "These children will learn; we will spot these children; we'll do everything possible."

I think that if they took a climate test, they would be rated as a positive climate school because of the positive expectations.

An analysis of the textbooks in the school determined which content was relevant and which content was not relevant. But in addition to that, superfluous tasks in books were discussed: should you do 20 problems rather than 10 problems, should you do 20 skill pages versus 5 skill pages.

The teachers began to make decisions. The staff collectively, under the direction of the principal, made decisions. This was the very key to this venture.

In the area of social studies and science, the teachers made the decision that they no longer would be teaching social studies and science in a textbook for third graders only. Larger units of instruction were developed--two each semester, one in science and one in social studies. The social studies unit was directly related to the skills of the CTBS.

Time-on-Task

We have done a great deal of study on analyzing the time component in the school--what would be taught at what time and how many minutes. Because it is an open school, the decisions were made collectively. In

an open school, there must be work with partners. This particular school helped us facilitate this process.

There was consideration on how many minutes would be part of the whole group instruction. It is very crucial in this program that children have so many minutes teaching time.

A teacher is teaching a particular skill, the other teacher is monitoring the students at that time; the students, not the teacher, are monitored to find out if the students are answering the questions that deal with that skill.

The monitoring phase is one of the unique parts of our program. We had teams of teachers in each subject area. The teachers were excellent. We had one teacher teaching and the other teacher monitoring. That was the key. They exchanged the monitoring components. As an example, one day the students were in a circle. The teachers were standing and the children sitting. I said, "Do you realize what you've done to the children? It's great when you are forty years old, but not when you are five years old." The children were straining their necks, and consequently they always looked up at the teachers. She was not aware that it was happening. When she stepped down and she was at eye-level with the children, they in turn responded to her in a much more positive manner. That was one example of monitoring. We also have done monitoring in different parts of the reading program. We need to work much more in this particular area.

Whether you agree with the philosophy or not, in West Virginia we are evaluated strongly on test results. We are evaluated by the public on test results. Our scores are published widely in West Virginia, and it is a way to establish public education in one way or the other. We have no choice but to accept it. Therefore, test results are crucial to a school system.

Absolutely, the discipline in the school has almost been extinguished in terms of behavior problems.

I remember when the test was given at the spring period. We spotted nine children in the third grade that needed direct eye contact in the test. They were pulled out, put in a closed situation, and the principal monitored those tests. These nine children were equipped at that point to make sure that they understood what they were doing. They were not lost in the shuffle. We felt that it was imperative to allow a child to have an optimum testing situation.

We are analyzing unobtrusive data in the school. We are looking at the number of volunteer inservice meetings that these teachers attend, the number of skills learned, and discipline referrals.

Next year, we hope to refine our feedback techniques. We hope to work specifically in our units so that they will be transferable to other schools. We hope to

analyze our text in a more sophisticated fashion. Our monitoring has to become much more refined and much more systematic. Finally, we need to locate the individual tasks of the students, and consider how well they are being monitored.

This is an example of the North Park Venture. I am really excited about it, I think it has a great deal of potential. It's success is primarily because of the efforts of a very dynamic principal's willingness to learn and a staff committed to the effort.

To contact the presenter, write:

Dr. Mary Marockie
RESA-6
5 Bank Street
Wheeling, West Virginia 26003